

**Growing Community Project Accomplishments: January 2007—January 2009**

- With the help of PAL's teachers and students we worked to create a neighborhood park survey and went door to door to administer the survey to gauge interest in community gardens and other park improvements within the 6<sup>th</sup> Ward / Midtowne neighborhood. We held two community meetings in the neighborhood to discuss potential sites for community gardens to gauge public support and hear community concerns about possible community gardens.
- In 2007 we worked with the Florence Crittenton Home to build a community garden for the girls who live there, with the help of the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) and other dedicated volunteers. The young women were involved in each step of the process, designing the garden, building it, planting and harvesting. In 2008 we helped the Florence Crittenton Home expand their garden to include room for squash, corn, beans, and two apple trees.



- We include grassroots fundraising in our project as part of a plan to not only generate money for community gardens, but also as a tool to draw in volunteers and generate consciousness about existing food insecurity and options to increase access to healthy, affordable food. We have held fundraisers with Blackfoot River Brewery, the Real Food Store, Benny's Bistro, the No Sweat Café, Café Artemis, and the Dive Bakery.
- We host community work days in the gardens across town in order to make the gardens more accessible to the community and to involve the community in the project.

- As part of the education component of the project, we organize free community classes that take place throughout the growing season. They are designed to decrease barriers to gardening. We taught classes on building raised beds, varieties best suited to this area, planting, a nutrition/cooking class using all seasonal ingredients that can be grown in Helena, transplanting, creating compost, and canning and preserving.



- We are working with ExplorationWorks! (an interactive children's museum) to build a community garden as part of the Exploration Garden. The Exploration Garden is used as an outdoor classroom by ExplorationWorks!, and also as a community garden for people within the neighborhood. In 2007, we built 9 raised beds for community gardeners, and in the spring of 2008 we flyer'd the neighborhood with applications for a community plot. Preference was given to people who both live in the neighborhood, and identify themselves as being low-income. We currently have 12 community gardeners at Exploration Garden.
- We have raised over \$1200 in donations to build a fence at Exploration Garden. The designing and building of the fence will be a collaborative effort between the community gardeners, WEEL, Exploration Works, and the GCP volunteers. The fence was completed over the course of 5 weeks with the help of over 20 dedicated volunteers.
- Using Exploration Garden as a model, we are working on a lease that can be used for community gardens on park lands all over Helena. We have developed a set of guidelines and rules that may be used as an example for groups starting a garden. We are working with the city to create a

process that for leasing and developing land for use as community gardens that can serve as a model for future community gardens in Helena.

- We are working with Selma Held and the Beltview Park Steering Committee as they work to develop the undeveloped parkland in their neighborhood. They are working with the HCC and the city in order to establish a model for other neighborhoods that wish to develop their parks. A group of volunteers went door-to-door throughout the neighborhood to ask their neighbors what they wanted to build in their park, and a large number of people would like to have a community garden.



- With the help of volunteer Joyce Brown, the support of Food Share, and the donations of materials and volunteer hours, we have built a community garden on Food Share property. The garden offers 11 plots for individual community members and their families, and 11 plots are dedicated to producing food for Food Share as a "Volunteer for Veggies" program. This is a way for the Food Share clientele and community members to participate in the garden without a large time commitment. They will be able to come work in the garden for a small time, and take home fresh veggies for their time. The rest of the produce grown in these beds will be donated directly to Food Share. This garden is temporary because Food Share is planning on expanding their warehouse in two or three years.



- Over the summer we donated over 400 pounds of veggies to Food Share through the Volunteer for Veggies program, and volunteers took home many more pounds.
- We hired an intern for the growing season of 2008 who lives in the Florence Crittenton Home. She helped with outreach, event planning, and garden maintenance. We are offering this position each year in order to provide a meaningful work experience for at-risk youth.
- In addition, we have been working with several neighborhoods to act as a resource of information and liaison with the city. Other community groups we work with to develop gardens include: Day Spring Loop, Janet Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Ward and Midtown, Rodney Street Neighborhood, St. Paul's United Methodist, St. Mary's Catholic Church, Covenant Methodist Church, New Life Lutheran Church, Crossroads Christian Church, and Plymouth Congregational. Other communities from throughout the state have also contacted us the GCP as a resource to develop community gardens in their area, including Great Falls, Butte, Whitehall, and Whitefish.
- The GCP received a grant from the High Stakes Foundation for \$20,000 to continue our work next year.

**AERO Member Profile****Knowledge to Build, Courage to Grow**

Helena's Richard Thieltges Volunteers with Community Gardening Project

By CONNIE DALCHERTY



Richard Thieltges, a life-long gardener and farmer has given freely of his tools, experience and time to make community gardens in Helena a reality.

“

I started gardening when I was six or seven

years old,” says Helena’s Richard Thieltges. And at sixty-two he’s still at it and still loving it. He understands that gardening is more than growing vegetables and flowers; gardening is a way of life, a way to connect with nature. “Tune my body and my brain to the music of the land,” implore the words of The Garden Song by Dave Mallett. And on his place south of Helena, Richard Thieltges does

just that. He has also found a way to share his passion with others.

He helps out with Helena’s Growing Community project. The project is fairly new – just started last year – but it is catching on. “We try to get people to have the experience of growing a garden,” he says. Working with AERO, Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL), and other community

volunteers, Richard helps to establish garden areas for the county’s lower income families. “When they have a work day, I show up,” he says. “I have the right tools.” With those tools he has helped to build raised beds, put up deer fencing, and haul in good soil. In the fall he helps to dig the plants under and prepare the soil for the next year. “It’s the physical labor of gardening that I like,” Richard says.



Volunteers, including Richard Thieltges, pitched in to construct two 80 foot long raised beds at the Helena Food Share facility. One of the beds will be used to grow food for the food bank recipients and the other will be used by community gardeners in Helena.

He also has the know-how, enthusiasm and willingness to help others. He talks about the backyard garden he helped start at the Florence Crittenton Home. “The girls really seemed to like it,” he says. They liked growing their own vegetables so much that this spring the managers asked Richard to help them expand the garden space so they can grow even more.

There is something about gardening that goes beyond the monetary value of the food that can be produced in a smallish urban setting. “It’s therapeutic,” Richard says. “It makes people feel good to just keep alive those skills.”

Richard knows about keeping skills and connections to the land alive—for him it is also about a connection to family. His father was a farmer in Germany who came to Montana as a teenager in order to make a living as a farmer. Richard grew up on a farm near Chester, along Montana's Highline. When he first left home for college he planned to get a degree in aeronautic engineering from the University of Washington. "It was the time of Sputnik and I was really interested in space," he recalls. The course work challenged his intellectual curiosity and continued to interest him in many ways. But there was something else to consider—quality of life.

*"Inch by Inch, row by row  
gonna make this garden grow;  
all it takes is a rake and a hoe  
and a piece of fertile ground"*

(The Garden Song, Dave Mallitt)

"I realized that I would spend the rest of my life getting up every morning and going to work for a big organization," he says. He asked himself, "Do I want to do that?" Without too much thought he knew the answer was no. So he changed his major and his place of education earning a BS degree in Agronomy from Montana State University in Bozeman. After graduation he returned home to work on

the family farm in Chester. For forty years Richard farmed along the Highline. "Over my lifetime I've owned three different farms," he says. "And gone through three or four years when there was no crop at all." The farming life was not always easy, but it allowed Richard to live the life he wanted.

About three years ago Richard decided to retire from farming completely. "I'm really glad not to lay awake at night and figure out how to pay the bills," he says. "Looking back I realize that I got into farming just so I could have the time and the opportunity to do what I really loved which is the gardening... and landscaping," he adds. Besides his extensive garden, Richard also has several fruit trees on his property and plans to try growing grapes this year. He also gathers mushrooms and wild berries in season. "I just like to harvest the bounty of nature," he says.

At sixty-two, Richard is beginning to realize there is a time limit to things. But with good health and an active mind, he knows he can, do anything he wants. "I just can't do everything," he says. Meanwhile he insists, "I have a fantastic life."

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